Gala reopens wounds for Japanese Americans

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It was 1951. Harry Truman was president, a first-class letter stamp was 3 cents, and in a televised ceremony at the Opera House, the United States and Japan signed the San Francisco Peace Treaty, which officially ended World War II in the Pacific.

"We were fully aware of it," said Hats Aizawa, then a 23-year-old in San Francisco. ". . . We just thought, thank God it was over. Get the peace treaty signed and let it all fade away. We just wanted to forget the fact that we were Japanese American."

Just as this Saturday's 50th observance of the treaty's signing has provoked bitter controversy over Japan's wartime aggression, the commemoration also evokes a deep ambivalence among Japanese Americans whose lives were profoundly affected by the war.

Japan's 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor set off hysteria that resulted in the wartime incarceration of West Coast Japanese -- two-thirds of them U.S. citizens.

"For most people, when you mention Japan, they think of Sony, Toyota, the recovery since the war," said Paul Osaki, executive director of the Japanese Community and Cultural Center of Northern California in San Francisco. "But for many Japanese Americans, there's a certain feeling in the gut when that word comes up in relation to the war. We had nothing to do with Pearl Harbor or the Rape of Nanking, but we still get hit by it. So I think there's a sense of being caught in the middle."

REP. HONDA SEEKS REPARATIONS

Indeed, Japanese Americans are being honored this week by both the sponsors of the treaty celebration and those protesting it. Among the critics are several prominent Japanese Americans, including state Rep. Mike Honda, D-San Jose, who don't believe Japan has taken full responsibility for its wartime actions.

Honda has co-sponsored a bill that would help U.S. prisoners of war sue Japanese firms that used wartime slave labor. A resolution carried by Honda and passed by the Legislature also urged Japan to apologize for its atrocities and pay reparations to victims.

At the time of the war, Japanese immigrants and their U.S.-born children, who were subjected to the same virulent anti-Asian sentiments expressed toward the Chinese, constituted a tiny and politically

powerless minority segregated in "Japanese towns" and barred from all but menial work.

Half a century and a sea change later, that racial isolation seems nearly unimaginable. About 3.7 million Asian Americans -- close to 11 percent of California's population -- live in the state.

In the nine-county Bay Area, the Asian population has soared 46 percent, to 1.3 million. Half of the state's almost 1 million Chinese Americans are in the Bay Area, but the region is also attracting large numbers of Filipinos, South Asians, Koreans and Vietnamese.

JAPANESE ASSIMILATED

Coincidentally, Japanese Americans are the only group whose numbers have dropped. With little new immigration and a high interracial marriage rate, Japanese Americans -- once deemed by some authorities as "unassimilable" -- are now the symbol of assimilation: They are well-educated, earn high incomes and are geographically dispersed.

"Once we were social pariahs," said Tomoye "Tami" Takahashi, 86, of San Francisco. "Now we have become valuable contributing members of American society."

Takahashi dislikes dwelling on the war years.

"It's not the happiest period of my life," she said. "We struggled in every way. We really had to do our utmost to get back on our feet."

Her most painful memories are of her family home in San Francisco, which was ransacked of household goods during her absence and became "free housing" for the throngs of newcomers in the wartime boom. When Takahashi returned in 1945, she went to a neighbor, who had agreed to keep the family's albums, scrolls and paintings. Instead, the neighbor, afraid to be called a "Jap lover, " had burned them.

"I cried for three days," Takahashi said.

The removal of almost 5,000 Japanese Americans from San Francisco's Japantown emptied the largest Japanese settlement on the West Coast. Thousands of African American war workers took their places.

When she returned, Takahashi found black-run barbershops and beauty salons, Creole restaurants and Pentecostal churches, instead of the grocery stores and tofu shops she knew.

"The sidewalk was ringing with their voices," said Takahashi, who with her husband, Henri, built up a chain of well-known Japanese goods stores in the Bay Area. "They stared at us with great curiosity because they'd never seen an Oriental."

As time went on, wartime jobs vanished and Japanese families and businesses returned. By 1951, a semblance of the old community had returned: a hotel, fish market, confectionery and string of family-run restaurants such as the Evergreen Fountain and the Sugar Bowl.

"I served in the Korean War, but every time I had furlough, I'd rush back to Japantown, where all my friends were," said attorney Steven J. Doi, 73.

Some of that cohesiveness resulted from racism.

"I hardly ventured outside, except to go to school," said Nob Fukuda, 68, of San Francisco, who in 1951 was an 18-year-old graduate of Polytechnic High. "Psychologically, I don't think it was too much of a welcoming place out there. "

Back then, Fukuda and his four brothers belonged to the Barons, a social and athletic club of nisei, or second-generation Japanese Americans.

"That sense of community is barely there now," he said.

REDEFINING COMMUNITY

Jaclyn Kuwada, 24, a yonsei, or fourth-generation Japanese American, isn't worried.

"Thing are changing," said Kuwada, of San Francisco. "But I think there will always be a sense of community. It may not be what my parents or grandparents identified."

As the young mold their own identity, the old turn to their cultural roots.

Doi, who has been honored by the Japanese government for promoting Japanese culture in America, has mixed feelings about the treaty protest.

"I don't in any way condone what the Japanese army did," Doi said. "But it won't serve any purpose to rake this all up. Selfishly speaking, it's not good for Japanese Americans to have Japan pictured as a terrible country. People can't distinguish. They still say, 'You bombed Pearl Harbor.' "

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